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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000916

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN PRESIDENTIAL CHIEF OF STAFF REVIEWS
DOMESTIC ISSUES

REF: STATE 98631

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) Summary: Presidential Administration Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev told the Ambassador on July 18 that Iran is using radical Islam and the narcotics trade to exert pressure on Azerbaijan, as exemplified by a recent attempt by six armed Iranians to penetrate the border with Azerbaijan and an Iranian military exercise near Nakhchivan. Mehdiyev said President Aliyev would not be in Azerbaijan during July 22 Azerbaijan Press Day, but he would review applications for pardoning journalists and other steps on media upon his return. Mehdiyev clarified that President Aliyev's July 2 comment at a police academy was not intended to imply that the police have a free hand in disrupting public demonstrations. Mehdiyev also said that President probably will review the draft national anti-corruption strategy for 2007-2010 in the coming weeks. End Summary.

12. (U) Participants included: the Ambassador, DCM, Ramiz Mehdiyev, Fuad Alasgarov (Law Enforcement Department Chief), Shahin Aliyev (Legal Department Chief), Ali Hasanov (Social-Political Affairs Chief), and Novruz Mammadov (Foreign Relations Department Chief).

Iranian Tools for Pressuring Azerbaijan

13. (C) As reported septel, Mehdiyev made several comments about Iranian support for Islamic extremism in Azerbaijan. Mehdiyev claimed Iran recently influenced the selection of a more radical candidate as the new leader of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan. He said the Iranian Cultural Center in Baku was instrumental in this effort. (NOTE: According to local press, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan chose Haji Movsum Samadov as their new leader on July 15. The party is rumored to have links to Iran, although the party's presence waxes and wanes over time.)

14. (C) Mehdiyev said that hundreds of Azerbaijanis go to Qom, Iran for theological studies. These students eventually return to Azerbaijan and seek to become leaders in mosques--posing the threat of a "fifth column" in Azerbaijan. Mehdiyev regarded these students as a force for radicalization in Azerbaijan.

15. (C) Mehdiyev said the growing number of women wearing headscarves in Azerbaijan is an indicator of rising Iranian influence. Mehdiyev commented that the GOAJ intends to prevent this trend now because it "will be impossible to stop" in the future. According to Mehdiyev, the GOAJ plans to require all students attending local schools at or below the high school level to wear uniforms to stop women from wearing headscarves.

16. (C) Referring to the perceived growing threat from Islamic extremism in Azerbaijan, Mehdiyev commented that the GOAJ currently is preparing an action plan to address this problem.

17. (C) Mehdiyev also highlighted drug trafficking from Iran as a serious concern. He remarked that several days ago, six armed Iranian citizens tried to penetrate the border from Iran. According to Mehdiyev, four escaped, one was wounded, and one was arrested by Azerbaijani authorities. Mehdiyev claimed that this group had sophisticated arms, included high-tech night vision goggles which cost approximately 250 - 300 thousand USD and which "cannot be found even in Europe." (NOTE: This story was carried in local press. GRPO is following up for more details.)

18. (C) Mehdiyev said that he learned on July 17 that Iranian special forces were conducting a military exercise in the direction of Nakhchivan (NFI).

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19. (C) The Ambassador reviewed U.S. concerns with the Russian decision to freeze participation in the Treaty and strongly encouraged the GOAJ not to reconsider its participation in this important agreement. Mehdiyev took note, but did not

BAKU 00000916 002 OF 003

reply.

Media Freedom

10. (C) The Ambassador said expectations are high for President Aliyev to pardon several journalists on July 22 (Azerbaijani Press Day); this is an opportunity for the GOAJ to send a positive signal about its commitment to media freedom. Mehdiyev remarked that President Aliyev would be out of the country July 22-23, but he will review pardon applications and other steps on media upon his return. Mehdiyev explained that there is an established process for considering pardons through the pardoning commission, which provides recommendations to the President. At the same time, the President has the power to issue pardons on his own initiative.

11. (C) The Ambassador thanked Presidential Aide Ali Hasanov for his role in chairing the international Friends of Azerbaijan working group on media freedom. The Ambassador reminded Mehdiyev that a group of Azerbaijan's international partners recently sent a letter laying out recommendations to the GOAJ for steps it can take to advance its commitment to media freedom.

President Aliyev's Comment about Police Behavior

12. (C) The Ambassador said President Aliyev's July 2 comment that police who broke up illegal rallies would not be prosecuted raised serious concern in Washington. (NOTE: Aliyev made the comment while giving a speech at the graduation ceremony of a local police academy.) The Ambassador noted that absent a clarification, Washington and the international community could interpret Aliyev's speech as giving a green light to police to use excessive force to disperse public rallies. Mehdiyev said that the international community knows President Aliyev is a "democraticman." Mehdiyev remarked that President Aliyev's comment was in reference to the police's legitimate mandate to maintain order as they did during the mass, illegal riots surrounding elections in October 2003 and November 2005. Aliyev did not intend to suggest that police could do whatever they want. Mehdiyev agreed with the Ambassador that police still need to act in accord with the highest human rights standards. Mehdiyev's staff indicated a written response to this request for clarification would be sent to the Embassy.

Anti-Corruption Efforts

13. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question about the status of the national anti-corruption strategy, Mehdiyev stated that the Commission on Combating Corruption probably would present the draft strategy to President Aliyev at the end of July or the beginning of August. The Ambassador provided Mehdiyev with a copy of the six recommendations the USG had outlined at the recent Transparency International conference to make the plan effective. Mehdiyev also noted that Presidential Aide Fuad Aleskerov would take the Embassy's suggestions under consideration. (NOTE: Embassy also recently provided suggestions to the Commission during recent workshops organized by DOJ.)

Seeking Support for Two Programs

14. (C) The Ambassador raised the issue of the DRL-funded project "Islam in a Democratic Azerbaijan," as an opportunity for the GOAJ to reinforce its goals of promoting religious tolerance. The Ambassador asked for support from the Presidential Administration for implementation of the program. Mehdiyev pledged to study the project, but was concerned that religious and GOAJ officials be included in the process and that the project's foreign funding be kept "behind the curtain."

15. (C) The Ambassador raised concern about Parliamentary foot-dragging on a USAID Parliamentary capacity-building program. (NOTE: While the USAID implementing party has arrived in Baku, they are unable to begin their work because

BAKU 00000916 003 OF 003

Parliamentary staff are trying to renegotiate the terms of the MOU. Specifically, Parliament wants to be given computer equipment as part of the package.) The Ambassador noted that President Aliyev approved this program in an MOU during the EPC.) Mehdiyev said he would tell Parliamentary Chief of Staff Safa Mirzayev to stop creating artificial obstacles that are hindering this project.

